

KOREA:

The Reluctant Spy

Two years ago, when North Korean journalist Lee Soo Keun jumped into a United Nations Command car at Panmunjom and sped off to asylum in South Korea amid a hail of Communist bullets, he was greeted in Seoul like a long-lost son. The jubilant South Koreans promptly made him a citizen and presented him with a furnished house, a chauffeur-driven Toyota sedan and a bank account that eventually grew to \$40,000. And late last year, conveniently forgetting a wife and three children back in North Korea, the 45-year-old Lee married a South Korean girl. His Communist past, so it seemed, had simply been a prologue to a life of capitalistic ease.

As one of the most prominent North Koreans ever to defect to the south, Lee's value to Seoul was considerable. He toured the country regaling audiences with tales of the "hellish" life in the north, and the South Korean Central Intelligence Agency put him on its payroll as a special consultant. Yet as time wore on, the agency began to notice some curious facts. To begin with, Lee never told the CIA much that it did not already know. He also seemed remarkably reluctant to indulge in personal criticism of North Korean leader Kim Il Sung. And sometimes Lee would unaccountably lapse into typically Communist double-talk, describing the Korean War as South Korea's "invasion of the north."

Payoff: At first, Lee's hosts concluded that such slips of the tongue were only to be expected from a man who had endured twenty years of Communist indoctrination. Nonetheless, CIA agents began to watch him more closely. And last month their surveillance finally paid off. Armed with a forged passport, Lee put on a wig and false mustache and secretly boarded an airliner bound from Seoul to Hong Kong.

The CIA allowed Lee to leave Seoul in the hope that he might expose some of his overseas contacts. But two days later, when he showed up at Hong Kong airport to board a plane headed for the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh, three CIA agents tackled him on the tarmac. After several minutes of inconclusive scuffling, airport police intervened. And apparently for fear of stirring up Chinese Communist sympathizers in Hong Kong, British officials subsequently refused to surrender Lee to the South Koreans.

This, however, proved only a brief reprieve for Lee. For although the British did put him on a plane bound for Phnom Penh, they chose a flight which made an intermediate stop in Saigon. There the

South Vietnamese Government quickly turned Lee over to CIA agents. And last week, with Lee safely back in Seoul, the South Koreans finally admitted that they had a double defector on their hands.

Lee, one official told Newsweek's Bernard Krisher, would probably be executed—"after a fair trial."

Mission: Despite that grim prospect, Lee proved to be a cooperative prisoner. He readily confessed that early in 1967 he had been summoned into the presence of Kim Il Sung, who had ordered him to "defect" to the south and to remain there as an undercover agent until Korea was reunified. "Do your best to achieve your mission for the fatherland," Kim admonished him. But that was easier said than done. Throughout his stay in the south, Lee was tortured by the constant fear of exposure. Finally, unable to stand the strain any longer, he had de-



Double agent Lee: Back in Seoul

cided to flee to Cambodia, where, he naively hoped, Kim would give him a new intelligence assignment.

In an age when espionage has achieved new heights of sophistication, it seemed incredible that North Korea's spymasters could have chosen an agent as ill-suited to his assignment as Lee. But then, it was no less incredible that it had taken the South Koreans two years to catch up with him. If the sorry saga of Lee Soo Keun proved anything at all, it was perhaps that intelligence establishments are, after all, bureaucratic institutions—with all that that implies.